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Both analysis and experience are necessary forms in the classroom. Together, they complement each other.

On the being of a teacher: analysis vs. experience in the classroom

by Linda Preston Scott



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In attempting to discuss ideas about what goes on (and should go on) in the classroom, I sometimes am the recipient of some rather derogatory remarks when I rely on words such as Apollonian or Dionysian to explain some of my thoughts on teaching. My friends who are more "classroom" oriented tell me to get my head from a rather private place and talk sensibly—"After all," they declare, "Apollo and Dionysus may have their place in Greek Myth, but in the seventh grade? No way!"

However, I fail to be convinced that we can't learn just a little bit of "practical" knowledge from looking at these terms—at least they say something to me—and I hope I can convince you that their study has merit. Perhaps the way to approach an explanation of what the terms Apollonian and Dionysian have to do with the classroom is to attempt to relate my interpretation of these metaphors—for metaphors they are and powerful ones too, as they help us understand two of the dominant modes of living in Western intellectual history.

Nietzsche provides the critical distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian. He views Apollonian as the impulse in which one sees things as detached from real experiences. These are the theoretical, intellectual impulses, which are constantly striving after measure, order and harmony—the impulses to preserve conform and moralize.¹

By contrast, Nietzsche sees the Dionysian mode of living as the style in which life is relived and reaffirmed, in which life's joys and sufferings are re-experienced.²

Ruth Benedict, in contrasting the life styles of different tribes of North American Indians also uses these two descriptive metaphors. She uses Apollonian and Dionysian as two entirely different ways of arriving at the values of existence.³ In her view, the Dionysian pursues these values by breaking away from the limits put upon him by his five senses, in order to enter another form of experience. "The desire of the Dionysian, in personal experience or in ritual, is to pass through it toward a certain psychological state, to achieve excess".⁴ Through this frenzied state he hopes to lose his individual state and find true wisdom.

According to Benedict, the Apollonian views this frenzied emotional state of the Dionysian with a great deal of skepticism. Since the Apollonian has no awareness of such experience, he doubts its value. He does not attempt to achieve "disruptive psychological states"¹⁵ but instead prefers to keep his individuality and here Benedict quotes Nietzsche as saying that the Apollonian "remains what he is and retains his civic name."¹⁶

It is not enough to say that the Apollonian impulse "rules the head" while the Dionysian impulse "rules the heart." Nor is it sufficient to say that the Apollonian-Dionysian contrast is the contrast of law and lawlessness or structure and freedom. Still more is involved. The major difference between the Apollonian and Dionysian impulse is the focus of their life-emphasis.

After an exploration of what I see as the life-emphasis implied by these two terms, I hope to move on, finally, to what all of this has to do with teachers and kids and classrooms.

The Apollonian, always striving for harmony and order, emphasizes self-awareness, the principle of the individual—the life contemplative. Apollonian man is a man of thought, of reflection. He exposes himself to the ideas of great men, great art, and history; he reflects on this and searches inside himself for truth and virtue. He studies life and attempts, through meditation, to impose some order on it. Apollonian man avoids, at any cost, giving up his own personality and faith in himself as final arbiter in all his experiences. In other words, he attempts to preserve self consciousness.

On the other hand, the Dionysian considers the principle of the individual as the source and primal cause of stultification and Nietzsche refers to Dionysian man as "one who has realized a temporary identification with the principle of life."¹⁷ Under the spell of Dionysus there are no boundaries between man and nature or between man and man.

Schooling, as it has traditionally been conducted, places considerable emphasis on Apollonian values. Apollonian influence is apparent in that teaching is structured to lead the individual through a set of ordered experiences which, theoretically, will enable him to search inside himself for answers to eternal questions about life. This type of schooling encourages experiences of thought rather than experiences of feeling. It asks the student to handle abstract ideas and symbols rather than deal with his emotions and feelings on an experiential level. It poses questions which require the student to look inside himself for answers and, following this insight, to act accordingly. The student is admonished to "do your own work" and "don't talk to your neighbor" which clearly places emphasis on the student himself to work out his own problems without any outside help.

The principle behind this kind of schooling is that the individual must learn early that he is the final source for all answers concerning his life and therefore, he must learn to depend on himself alone as early as possible.

An example of Apollonian teaching is the case of the teacher who encourages her students to formulate questions, to evaluate principles, to explain, to define, to conclude. This teacher requires her students to reflect upon the subject at hand, to read books and write papers so that they may be better able to translate the subject matter into a form more understandable to them.

In recent years, many educators have become alarmed at this "increasing separation between intellect and feeling" and have proposed various ways of rectifying the situation. Many of these proposals merely shift the emphasis from Apollonian forms of schooling to Dionysian forms of schooling. They reason that the sterile Apollonian emphasis on abstract forms of thought has created a society of alienated individuals who only value intellectual endeavor and whose attempts to discount "the feeling side" of the nature of man has caused them to become increasingly depersonalized and unable to relate to each other. Those, who propose to remedy the present situation by a shift to Dionysian forms of schooling, plan to do so by shifting the emphasis from thought to feeling. Their thesis is that whatever a student learns through physical and emotional interaction with the world is the most worthwhile learning. Therefore, they have turned their classrooms into laboratories for physical experimentation. These Dionysian teachers believe that this type of learning will affect the student to the point that he will no longer need the introspection and questioning heretofore thought to be so important to his education.

The Dionysian teacher would encourage his students to be unashamed of their feelings no matter how small they may seem to be. Such feelings are viewed as important to the Dionysian teacher because he believes that to deny such feelings is to deaden oneself to the full force of humanness. Such a teacher would hold that subject matter or objective knowledge is relatively unimportant when compared with the emotional and moral development possible with Dionysian teaching. The Dionysian teacher sees education as a sharing which enables participants to reach a level of understanding about reality that is not possible for the lone individual.

Although teachers have been influenced by both Apollonian and Dionysian modes of viewing the world and the classroom, the problem is that they are often sold on one of these forms of schooling, almost to the exclusion of the other. As teacher educators we are really short-changing students through our refusal to more fully integrate the methods implied in Apollonian and Dionysian perspectives. Even though the two modes of teaching are almost always used in conjunction with each other, it is to a very limited extent.

If education is viewed comprehensively as involving a combination of Dionysian and Apollonian experience, a novel set of educational goals emerge.

Some of the qualities possessed by an educated individual when viewed from both Apollonian and Dionysian perspectives are:

1. One who is able to interact with other members of society with sufficient understanding of his needs and rights as well as recognition of the needs and rights of others.
2. One who is able to organize information in a way that is meaningful to him and is able to internalize this information and apply it to his daily life.
3. One who finds joy and meaning in his profession, field, vocation and has been able to commit himself to purposeful pursuit of knowledge in that area.
4. One who is able to enjoy to the fullest extent his all-experiencing being; who can take pleasure in the lived moment of Dionysian experience, and can later integrate that experience so that it becomes a bright thread in the variegated tapestry that is his life.

Having delineated some of the qualities of an individual whose educational experiences have been meaningful from both Apollonian and Dionysian perspectives, it now seems pertinent to look at some of the things teachers can do (and are doing) to create such educational experiences.

Planning experiences, which will assist the student not only in learning to enjoy his experiencing, feeling self, but also in learning to reflect on experiences, internalize them, and derive some meaning from them, is no easy task. The following are some suggested teacher actions which should be of assistance in planning such experiences.

1. The teacher approaches his class as a lone individual with ideas and feelings he wants to share with them, rather than as a representative of established authority.
2. The teacher's attitude toward his students is one of openness and acceptance. He realizes that they have varied interests, feelings and attitudes and that his subject matter must have some relevance to their individual lives for them to be capable of grasping meaning from it (in the Apollonian phase) (values them as members of the group in the Dionysian phase).
3. The teacher plans classroom experiences to include every student in some way. He encourages each student to freely share his ideas and feelings with the class; emphasizing that no opinion is without value, because opinions are the result of one's own experiences. The teacher explains to his students that, since no two people have exactly the same background, each person's ideas are unique in that they are grounded in his own experiencing of life. Therefore, the teacher encourages his students to express themselves because otherwise they may be depriving other class members of new ideas (otherwise Dionysian experience cannot occur).
4. The teacher encourages experiences of reflection and gives outside assignments which require careful, well-thought-out work. The teacher assigns telling questions regarding his subject-matter field; questions which require the student to put this subject matter in the context of his life and his relation to society.
5. The teacher uses many different methods; he enthusiastically shares ideas in group discussion; he questions students to see if they are gaining a clear understanding of assigned topics; he assigns projects which require students to relate abstract principles to physical performance; he may give in-

teresting, well-thought-out lectures in order to explicate different points which confuse students; he turns questions around and asks "What do you think?" when he senses that students are exploiting his knowledge of content in order to avoid involving themselves in work; he requires outside paper work which does not merely report what great thinkers have said, but rather expresses the thoughts of the student and how those thoughts relate to other works in the field. The teacher is prepared to interchange these many methods in order to obtain and keep the interest of his students.

6. More important than any of the above suggestions is that the teacher be willing to use everything in his power when he enters the classroom. He should actively work to create a Dionysian experience; completely immerse himself in the experience of the moment; so that he feels and senses the proper thing to do for his students **now**. In order to free himself for such classroom experience, he must give a great deal of time outside the classroom to Apollonian reflection and evaluating (i.e. where has the class been, where is it going, what is the next step, etc.). During this reflection he must also ask himself what effect his class and his students are having on his life (i.e. is he growing, is he fulfilled). If the teacher is not insisting that he get as much from the class as his students, he is cheating both himself and his students.

Both Apollonian and Dionysian forms are necessary in the classroom because, taken alone, the Apollonian mode of being can be cold, isolated and lonely, and the Dionysian is soon over, leaving those who depend solely on its merits empty. Together, they complement each other and form a gestalt of Dionysian-experiencing/Apollonian-evaluating which is vital not only to classroom experience of the group but also to the intellectual development of the individual.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Inc., 1956), page 49.
2. *Ibid.*, page 67.
3. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: The New Library of World Literature, Inc., 1934), page 72.
4. *Ibid.*, page 72.
5. *Ibid.*, page 72.
6. *Ibid.*, page 72.
7. William M. Salter, *Nietzsche The Thinker* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), page 43.